**Soviet Union: A Discussion on the Disintegration of the USSR State from a Historical and Civilization Perspective**

**Collapse of Socialist Social System and the Disintegration of the USSR State Are Two Different Issues**

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On December 25, 1991, Gorbachev announced his resignation, and the hammer and sickle flag was slowly lowered from the Kremlin, marking the Soviet Union's entry into history. The disintegration of the Soviet Union was one of the two most important historical events in the world after the end of World War II (the other was the founding of the People's Republic of China). It completely changed the international structure and international rules formed after World War II, and mankind entered a new era of globalization. The material foundation we enjoy today, as well as the popular values ​​of society, are all built on this foundation.  
  
Therefore, the collapse of the Soviet Union is an event that affects the fate of mankind and also profoundly affects the destiny of China. Its causes and consequences deserve serious consideration and interpretation. However, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of the collapse of the Soviet Union in China. Regardless of political stance, the consensus is still that "the collapse of the CPSU is due to the three monopolies" (power monopoly, economic monopoly, and economic monopoly) or "the collapse of the Soviet Union is the result of the peaceful evolution of the West." There is even less discussion on the historical impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union.  
It has been 30 years since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In these years, our humanities and social sciences have made great progress. We should have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, so as to live up to the research value of the Soviet Union as a "civilization history level" and summarize things that are more meaningful for China's development. Because China and the Soviet Union are both late-developing powers, many lessons from the Soviet Union's development transformation and building of global leadership are worth learning. This article will use the perspective of big history to explore several core issues related to the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

**1. The perspective of civilization history**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union actually includes two aspects: one is the collapse of the Soviet Stalinist socialist system at the political level, the consequence of which is the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party; the other aspect is the collapse of the multi-ethnic state empire dominated by Russians, the consequence of which is the independence of various ethnic states and the disintegration of the USSR state.

Nowadays, people often confuse the two things, believing that the disintegration of the Soviet Union is the inevitable consequence of a highly centralized political and economic system. However, if we look at the modern history of the world, political revolutions may not necessarily lead to the disintegration of the state structure. For example, the Xinhai Revolution in China in 1911 did not lead to the disintegration of the Chinese multi-ethnic empire; the Russian Revolution in 1917 did not lead to the disintegration of the Tsarist Russian conquest empire. However, why did the drastic change of the Soviet system in 1991 lead to the collapse of the state? This needs to be interpreted from the perspective of civilization.

The Russian nation has been in a stage of continuous rise and development since the 16th century. Over the next 300 years, it has successively destroyed a series of ethnic regimes in the Volga Basin, Siberia and Central Asia, and gained a large amount of territory from wars against Sweden, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Qajar Dynasty of Iran, the Ottoman Empire and the Qing Empire, establishing a large empire with an area of ​​22 million square kilometers and ruling more than 100 ethnic groups.  
The essence of this empire is a political and civilizational order created by the Orthodox Slavs. The core of the order is the Slavic Orthodox civilization, which also includes the Catholic Polish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian civilizations, the Protestant Baltic civilizations, and the Islamic Caucasian and Central Asian civilizations. For these "marginal civilizations", the Russians can only conquer them by force, and cannot create a new civilization to integrate and digest them, because many nations have a longer history than Russia and a more developed economy. These marginal civilizations will eventually have a strong centrifugal force on Russia.

However, the Russian civilization, which was in its ascendant, was able to glue together the mosaic of the empire’s ethnic groups through its population, culture, and military advantages. The Russian nation was one of the fastest growing nations in the world at the time. In 1719, the population was about 11 million, and in 1914 it reached about 70 million, an increase of 5.4 times in nearly 200 years. During this period, the population of China increased by less than 1.5 times. The Russian nation jumped from a second-class nation in Europe to the largest nation in Europe. The rapid population growth allowed the civilization to maintain a strong external tension. By the beginning of the 20th century, more than 9 million immigrants had infiltrated every corner of the conquered lands, ensuring control over these places. This was also the fundamental reason why the empire was able to be preserved in the severe turmoil after the October Revolution.

At the same time, the Russians, who have convenient exchanges with Western civilization, have achieved more civilization than other nations. They have produced writers such as Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky, natural scientists such as Lobachevsky, Mendeleev, and Pavlov, and artists such as Tchaikovsky and Repin. These are all world-class treasures. The advantage in cultural soft power also makes the Russians' rule over ethnic minorities in border areas more legitimate.  
The Soviet Union, which inherited the colonial legacy of the Russian Empire, was a brand new country in terms of ideology, but it still faced the same problem as all multi-ethnic empires: how to control ethnic minorities and maintain unity. However, in the early days of the Soviet Union, the Russians continued the tension of the imperial era and were still able to continue to control the state well.

During this period, the number of Russian immigrants in the border areas increased further (from 9 million to more than 20 million), the central power penetrated the border areas to the grassroots, and the Russian language became more popular than ever before. It seemed that the Russians had avoided the danger of the collapse of the empire or civilization order under the Soviet system.

But starting in the mid-20th century, Russian control over ethnic minorities within the Soviet Union began to weaken dramatically, as evidenced in three areas:  
First, Russia's demographic advantage was declining. After completing industrialization, the Russians, who were in the early stages of development, encountered a population birth rate cliff problem, with the fertility rate dropping sharply from 6.08 in 1925 to 1.94 in 1964. Affected by this, the proportion of Russians in the Soviet Union continued to decline, from nearly 60% in 1950 to 51% in 1989, barely reaching the majority.

The 1970 Soviet census showed that in the 14 republics outside the Russian Federation, the proportion of Russian population in 9 was declining, and the control of Russians over the entire country was weakened.

Second, the decline of Russian culture. The reason can be said to be that ideological autocracy and anti-counterrevolutionary activities made the Russians dig their own graves. In the early days of the Soviet Union, at least 6 million people died in various political repressions, most of whom were intellectuals, priests, officials, businessmen and other social elites. Their mass extermination meant that social culture was breaking.

After World War II, Russian culture was no longer the same as it was in the early 20th century. As a result, the Russians gradually lost their cultural discourse power to rule other nations.  
Third, the overall rise of ethnic minorities in terms of civilization. After experiencing industrialization, the population of ethnic minorities increased rapidly. From 1939 to 1989, the population of the Russian ethnic group increased from 99.59 million to 145 million, an increase of 45%, while the population of the Uzbek ethnic group increased from 4.84 million to 16.69 million, the population of the Azerbaijan ethnic group increased from 2.27 million to 6.67 million, the population of the Armenian ethnic group increased from 2.15 million to 4.62 million, and the population of the Turkmen ethnic group increased from 810,000 to 2.72 million, all increasing by 1-3 times, and the growth rate was much higher than that of the Russian ethnic group.  
What followed was the development of national self-awareness and national culture. If we say that when the Soviet Union was first established, most ethnic minorities were just tribes without self-awareness and very backward, then after the mid-Soviet period, they had become modern nations. This is the universal benefit of the Soviet Union's development, and it also created the foundation for the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

By the late Soviet Union, the internal forces of the civilized order built by the Russians in the 19th century had undergone a fundamental reversal. On the one hand, there was the Russian ethnic group, which was in a state of decline and declining in population, and on the other hand, there were ethnic minorities whose self-consciousness was gradually awakening and whose population was growing rapidly. The absolute control of the Russians over the entire empire was rapidly losing. One of the most obvious examples was that at the end of the Soviet Union, as the army that paid the most attention to the purity of the Slavs, Muslim soldiers accounted for nearly 40%. If the Russians can no longer control the violent machine that intimidates other ethnic groups, how can they talk about controlling other ethnic groups?

In the late 1970s, Western Soviet experts who understood the importance of the concept of civilizational conflict and population ratios sensed the risk of the Soviet Union's disintegration. At this time, the Hoover Institution at Stanford University published “The Last Empire: Nationality and the Soviet Future”, edited by Robert Conquest, and the Paris Institute of Political Studies published La Politique soviétique au Moyen-Orient, a professor at the school.

These books all argued that the risk of ethnic conflict to the Soviet Union was far greater than the impact of the highly centralized model of the Stalinist system.  
Therefore, the collapse of the Soviet Union cannot be completely attributed to the failure of the Stalinist system, but is also the result of changes in the population and civilization structure. The increasing imbalance in the power comparison between various ethnic groups and civilizations within the Soviet Union accelerated the collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. If the Russians still maintained an absolute advantage in the empire, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union would not have collapsed so quickly; even if the Communist Party of the Soviet Union collapsed, the Russians would still change the system to continue to maintain the multi-ethnic empire.  
The lesson of the Soviet Union's collapse once again illustrates the fundamental impact of demographic changes on the political order of a multi-ethnic country, which is a risk that any multi-ethnic country will eventually face in its historical evolution. Political scientists such as Huntington worry that if the European white population in the United States falls below 50% in the future, the federation may split, and this is also the reason; China's multi-ethnic regions in western China will also face the test of the law of civilization conflict.

**2. Transformation Perspective**

Another result of studying the ideologization of the Soviet Union is that whether people like the Soviet system or not, they all overemphasize the particularity of the Soviet system and have always ignored the general laws of human modernization transformation. It seems that the Soviet Union (or all socialist countries) is an area outside of these laws.

In fact, the Soviet system did not deviate from the general laws of human society. The entire Soviet history, as well as Russia's "post-Soviet history" during the transition period, can be explained by the general development and transformation theory. The Soviet system failed because it could only solve some problems in the early stages of modernization, but could not provide solutions for the entire process of social modernization and transformation, and was ultimately abandoned by history.  
Since entering modern times, human society has faced two basic missions, namely, achieving industrialization in the economy and democratization in politics. In order to achieve these two goals, liberal capitalism and socialism emerged almost at the same time. As a late-developing country, the Russian Empire witnessed the various drawbacks of early Western liberalism. When faced with the issue of how to achieve modernization, intellectuals generally tended to adopt the socialist model.  
Against this background, the October Revolution broke out in Russia and the socialist Soviet Union was established.

The Soviet practice proved that the extreme public ownership of the means of production (essentially state ownership) and the management method of state intervention in production (essentially a planned system) were conducive to the rapid realization of capital accumulation and the fastest way to complete industrialization for backward countries. Later, the practice of China (Taiwan, China, and South Korea also adopted similar methods) also proved that the Soviet system was very effective.  
However, industrialization is not the end of a country's modernization. After industrialization, it will face more development transformation needs: politically, urbanized civil society has higher requirements for the right to express ideas freely and participate in politics; economically, it requires breaking away from past path dependence and creating a sustainable growth model. If these problems can be solved, it is possible to solve the problems of growth stagnation and social conflicts and join the ranks of developed countries. If these problems cannot be solved, it will often fall into stagnation or chaos and be trapped in the "middle-income trap" for a long time.

In fact, it is not just late-developing regions such as Latin America, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Even the developed countries of Britain, the United States and Western Europe have encountered social conflicts and the bottleneck of middle-development during the period of industrialization completion. The European Revolution of 1848 was a manifestation of the social and economic crisis after the initial industrialization. Britain improved and transformed the capitalist system through democratic reforms in the 1860s, and the United States solved the problem of transformation through the Progressive Movement.  
However, the Soviet Union thought it had created a shortcut to escape the universal laws of humanity, ignored the transformation experience of Western developed countries, and not only resisted reform, but also moved in another direction to solve the problem: shrinking corporate autonomy, shrinking civil freedom of speech, and condoning corruption of power. In the face of the transformation after industrialization, the Soviet Union proposed a wrong plan, which led to its economy falling into trouble as early as the late 1970s, which then triggered a political revolution and the Soviet Communist Party lost power.

Therefore, the Soviet system is a "pre-modern" system. It could solve the problem of initial industrialization, but it could solve the problem of how to build a more developed society. Now many people are discussing whether China will repeat the mistakes of the Soviet Union. From this perspective, although China has gone further than the Soviet Union in economic reform, it has not made a fundamental breakthrough in the political system of the Soviet model. We will still encounter the risks of the Soviet transformation, which is where we need to remain vigilant. China should widely absorb the achievements of modern civilization and inject more modernity into the system so that the system will not be out of touch with the needs of social transformation.

**3. Does the collapse of the Soviet Union mean that the global socialist movement has reached a low ebb?**

This is also a very serious question. Because the Soviet Union regarded its model of violent revolution and the establishment of public ownership as the only way to achieve socialism, many people believe that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a fundamental setback for the world socialist movement. Since then, socialism has been on the decline and marginalized in global politics. In fact, this view deviates from Marxism and is a narrow understanding of the global socialist movement.  
If you are familiar with the history of the development of socialist thought, you will find that socialism was just a "fringe radical doctrine" when liberalism was prevalent in the 19th century, but it widely absorbed the achievements of human thought progress in the 20th century and evolved into a complex and diverse ideological spectrum, moving to the center of the historical stage and playing the leading role with liberalism. The two competed and complemented each other and jointly created a huge leap in human civilization in the 20th century. It is no exaggeration to say that the two biggest trends in human history in the 20th century were democratization and socialism.

Among the various schools of Western socialism, the most successful one can be said to be the exploration of democratic socialism by the socialists who inherited Engels's thoughts in his later years. After the end of World War II, in the developed Western world, except for Japan and the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Australia have long been ruled by labor parties or socialist parties that believe in socialism. Among them, the German Social Democratic Party was founded under the guidance of Engels and is the oldest party in Germany's political life today. Its 21st Century Program (2007 Hamburg Program) clearly states that Marxism is its basic belief and socialism is its goal; and the Swedish Social Democratic Party also stated in the first sentence of the party constitution: Establishing a democratic, free and united socialism is its goal.

By the late 20th century, in those Western countries with strong socialist traditions and long-term socialist party rule, capitalism transformed by the socialist movement was no longer the primitive capitalism of the era of Marx and Engels.

As the working class fought for universal suffrage, the parliaments of capitalist countries increasingly felt the will of the proletariat; the shareholding system, secondary distribution and heavy taxes on property also changed the situation of the bourgeoisie monopolizing the means of production and wealth, and the distribution of wealth was increasingly tilted towards the workers. Socialism has taken root in every corner of developed capitalist society, which also confirms what Marx said: socialism can only be built on the basis of developed capitalism.  
Many political scientists and economists now regard the Nordic model countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark as socialist countries. At least it is now difficult to say whether these countries are capitalist or socialist countries, and whether there are more capitalist or socialist elements in their societies.

From a materialistic perspective, the fundamental sign of whether a society has a socialist color is not whether it adopts the Soviet model, but whether capital and capitalists are effectively constrained in national policies, and whether the vast majority of grassroots people have the right to participate in national management and the distribution of material wealth. In this sense, the world socialist movement still exists in a wide range of forms around the world, and the belief in Marxism and socialism can only become more and more popular with the future productivity.

Therefore, from the perspective of the great history of human development, the failure of the Soviet Union is only an episode in the global socialist movement. It has not changed the general trend of the global socialist movement. Socialism is still a mainstream thought in the West. Marx was rated as "the greatest thinker of the millennium" by the BBC, which shows the degree of recognition and acceptance of Marxism by the West.

**IV. The Impact of the Disintegration of the Soviet Union on the World and China**

Finally, let's talk about the impact of the disintegration of the Soviet Union on the course of world history, which is also a less discussed issue. The disintegration of the Soviet Union is not only the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also the collapse of an international system. After World War II, the Soviet Union created an international system with the socialist camp as its core.

At its peak, this system had more than 50 countries, accounting for about one-third of the world's population. Under the leadership of Soviet planning thinking, this system only carried out internal trade cycles and basically had no contact with the outside world. It was a strict "closed loop". Therefore, during the Cold War, the world was divided into two opposing parts, which seriously hindered globalization.

The dramatic changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe opened the iron curtain between the two camps, and globalization unfolded at an unprecedented speed. In the past three decades, the speed of capital flow and trade growth has been much higher than that during the Cold War. For example, the total global investment only increased three times from 1970 to 1985, but increased nearly 16 times in the 15 years from 1992 to 2007, from US$186.3 billion to US$3,134 billion (data source: World Bank website); the total global trade in goods increased by more than 50% between 1991 and 1995, from US$6.98 trillion to US$10.5 trillion, and reached US$39 trillion in 2019, an increase of more than 4.5 times.

Thanks to the increase in investment and trade, the global economy has also grown from $23.9 trillion in 1991 to $87.4 trillion in 2019. It can be said that the speed of economic development and technological progress in any period of human history has never been as fast as in the three decades since the end of the Cold War. These three decades are a rare "golden age".  
  
However, we should not ignore that the capital globalization after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has created new adverse consequences. In the process of re-matching global capital, markets, and resources, capital and technology with good liquidity have seized the main benefits, and the working class in developed countries has become a victim of globalization, resulting in an increasingly serious polarization between the rich and the poor in the West. The Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States and the rise of Trumpism are not unrelated to this.  
From the perspective of the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union on global geopolitics, in addition to the United States being able to establish absolute global hegemony, the biggest impact is the rise of China. In terms of the outcome of the world's evolution over the past 30 years, China can be said to be the biggest beneficiary of the collapse of the Soviet Union. So how did the collapse of the Soviet Union affect China's national destiny?

It is reflected in the following three aspects.  
First, the significance of globalization mentioned above for China's economic rise. In this globalization that re-matched capital, technology and resources, China, with its largest population, best-quality labor force and largest market, has gained the favor of global capital and technological forces, becoming the place with the most capital and technological patents in the world, starting rapid industrialization and becoming the world's factory. The globalization of trade has further stimulated the development of China's manufacturing industry and strengthened its position as the world's manufacturing center. Without the acceleration of globalization brought about by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it would have been impossible for China to create such an economic miracle in 30 years.

Second, the collapse of the Soviet Union pointed out the direction of reform for China and avoided the occurrence of fundamental principled mistakes. China's economic reform in the 1980s was very volatile in its goals, wavering between learning from the Western market economy and learning from Eastern Europe to establish a commodity economy under the guidance of planning. The collapse of the Soviet Union made Chinese decision-makers thoroughly realize that market-oriented reform is the only way. Therefore, within less than ten months after the collapse of the Soviet Union, two major events occurred in China: Deng Xiaoping's speech during his southern tour and the establishment of a socialist market economic system at the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. (1992)

For a considerable period of time thereafter, the Communist Party of China consciously took the Soviet Union's lessons as a warning and made many adjustments in protecting people's livelihood, combating corruption and promoting integrity, and diplomacy, which played an inestimable role in China's early development and transformation.  
Third, the disintegration of the Soviet Union eliminated one of the strongest competitors for China's rise. If the Soviet Union had chosen the path of peaceful reform and transformation and joined the world economic system like China, it would have been easier for the Soviet Union, with its good industrial and technological foundation and civilizational affinity with the West, to achieve economic take-off. The Soviet Union would have continued to maintain its position as the second most powerful country, or even replaced the United States as the first most powerful country.

Although China and the Soviet Union have ideological affinity, the two countries are more importantly competitors in geopolitical interests. The conflict of interests between China and the Soviet Union in the entire Asian continent is more extensive than that between China and the United States. Therefore, a powerful and rising Soviet Union will compete with China for resources for global industrial and technological transfer on the one hand, and will do everything possible to suppress China's rise on the other hand. In a world dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union, China will definitely not have much room for development.

Therefore, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the subsequent decline of Russia are God's great favor to China, providing a precious window of peace for China's rise. Since the Opium War, China has never had such a relaxed international environment as the thirty years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union's disintegration left a power vacuum in the vast third world, which also provided space for China to exert its international influence in the future. Imagine if there was still a huge Soviet Union in our north today, would China have the opportunity to become the world's second largest economy today?

Whether in the past or now, the Soviet Union is very important to China, but the Chinese are not very interested in Soviet history. Soviet-Russian studies are just a tepid, semi-marginal subject, which is not on the same level as the well-developed Russian studies in the United States and Western Europe. Recently, Western media have paid a lot of attention to the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and some have even made documentaries, while China has paid little attention to this matter. It seems that the Soviet Union’s pain and suffering have nothing to do with China.

I hope that in the future more people will make more valuable observations and interpretations of the Soviet Union from a new perspective.